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Smokers Under Siege Huddle Together Against a Chill Wind

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There Is Little Left to Do Now But to Loiter in Doorways As the Times Pass Them By

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David Snead's bare fingers, bright pink from the cold, clutch tightly to a coffee cup and to what's left of his burning Marlboro.

He could retreat to the cafe just steps away, near a pretty Boston park. But Mr. Snead prefers to stand, shiver and smoke amid the strewn butts and cigarette ashes outside his place of work, the New England Telephone building.

Why here?

"Gossip," says Mr. Snead, motioning to the smokers chattering in small groups around him. "We live on it."

The Hot Line

"You find out everything that happens in your department," adds Glenn Johnson, a co-worker dragging on a Kool Light. "We know it all before it's announced."

Messrs. Snead and Johnson are part of a growing throng of outcast smokers huddled in doorways of smoke-free offices everywhere. Years of antismoking fervor, capped by last week's decision by the Environmental Protection Agency to link second-hand smoke to cancer, have put more and more of the great indoors off-limits to smokers. While smoke-free buildings are improving indoor air quality, they have also enlarged the fumy ranks of the doorway people, and tightened their unity of purpose.

"There's an empathy that smokers have for one another," says Greg Gilmartin, his frosted breath perfumed with tobacco outside the One Post Office Square office building in Boston. "It's not exactly camaraderie, but we are connected. There's a subtle trust that exists, so you might share something with a smoker that you wouldn't with somebody else."

Smoke Signals

At the portals of towers across urban America, smokers are networking. In the doorway they find not only familiar faces, ready to exchange rumors over a quick cigarette. They can always find a light, and occasionally more than that. The doorway people know they are doing something that may eventually kill them. Many say they want to quit (or want to want to). But in the meantime, theirs is the bittersweet affinity of the exiled, a pariah society of guilty pleasure.

Tim, an architect in Chicago, says fellow smokers on his floor will lean into his office and say, "How 'bout a PSO meeting?" The initials stand for Public Smokers Organization. They then head downstairs and gather in an alley outside his building. "We don't allow anyone to meet with us unless they're smoking, or at least *holding* a cigarette," he says.

A cigarette isn't all Tim is hitting on. He finishes up his smoke with a young woman in the alley. "You know, we met in the office," he says, watching her go back inside. But the smoking tete-a-tetes "have really helped out," he says confidentially, lowering his voice. Asked for his full name, Tim raises his eyebrows and says, "I can't do that. I'm married."

Love blooms and wilts among the ashes. Peter Thibeault, a Fidelity Investments employee who is divorced, says he met his current girlfriend outdoors on a smoking break. But Kelly King, an administrative assistant, dismissed out of hand a stockbroker who asked for a date in the outdoor smoking refuge at Atlanta's Piedmont Center. His breathless, futile pickup

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line: "I didn't know you smoked."

This time of year, the doorway people seem to come down with a lot of colds. Bosses aren't always indulgent of workers constantly taking smoking breaks, so the offenders will slip out furtively and coatless, as if to answer a call of nature, which in a sense is true.

"They say smoking is dangerous to your health," says Danny Cupicha, a systems analyst who lights up outside Two Penn Plaza in New York. "Well it is. You can catch pneumonia out here."

But for some denizens of the doorway, putting on a brave face against the cold seems almost a part of the unhealthy ritual. "It doesn't bother us," says Austin Lonberg, a 63-year-old pipe smoker, standing in short sleeves in the 20-degree air on Chicago's West Monroe Street. "Not too bad today," insists a coatless Charley Barry, hunching up his shoulders as he puffs outside a Boston office of Fidelity.

People-Watching

Distinct subcultures have evolved. Mr. Barry and others of his ilk gather around front doors. They seem to be open and garrulous. They people-watch between puffs. "The two of us love women," says Joe Maloney, a smoking pal of Mr. Gilmartin's in Boston, "and this is an interesting spot for watching women."

Back-door huddlers tend to be fidgety and less talkative. Many of them say they aren't supposed to be out on break.

Then, there are the circlers, loners whose concern for their good health is made manifest by walking briskly around buildings. "I'm getting my exercise," announces one happy aerobic circler, a wisp of smoke trailing him as he lopes past the doorway of New England Telephone at 8:30 in the morning.

The smoking circle at the Atlanta center is nature-conscious. "A lot of us talk about the bird nest in the tree," says Shelly Dobbs, a property manager, who points to a slim dogwood below a second-floor walkway where smokers gather. "The same red robin comes to lay eggs every year. We talk about how the eggs are hatching, how the babies are doing." The smokers were sad to see that two chicks this year didn't survive.

Taking Care of Business

Doorway people say their gatherings can be more productive than they appear. "I do quite a bit of business out here," says Mr. Gilmartin, a data-processing consultant at Fidelity. "Just yesterday morning, a quality-assurance guy who had to approve my work was unavailable – they said he was going into a meeting. But I met him out here. He goes inside, and five minutes later, it's done."

Gary Kulper, a staff attorney with a federal agency in Washington, learns about pending projects and exchanges professional advice with other smokers in the 10-by-10 smoking room on his floor. "I'll be talking to somebody, and it turns out they want to hire outside counsel for a multimillion-dollar project," says the 41-year-old Mr. Kulper, who has been a Viceroy man for 22 years. "I'll put them in contact with whomever they need to talk to."

It was in her smoking klatch that Ms. Dobbs first learned that a branch manager of a big tenant at Piedmont Center was being demoted – a couple of months before he himself found out. Messrs. Barry and Thibeault say their gatherings are the best source of the latest skinny on which departments are being transferred to Fidelity's data operations in Dallas – and who will lose jobs as a result.

From the bygone days of smoky cafes to this very moment, smokers and nonsmokers alike have debated just what it is that attracts people to cigarettes. Author Tom Robbins once wrote that it wasn't the smoke, but the fire. Perhaps it is fellowship.

"Your boss lights up a cigarette, you have a cigarette, and you get to know each other a little better," says Mr. Kulper, the attorney. "You recognize each other as members of the latest embattled minority class."

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